"A Slavery Question"

Memorandum by

Alex Deinst

1919

I wrote this 10 years ago

but have never had it

published.

Alex Deinst

1919

Slavery
13 Pages

A SLAVERY QUESTION IN THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA, IN THE YEAR 1847.

BY

Dr. ALEX. DIENST, Temple, Texas.

The following series of letters, in reference to the expulsion of a student from Columbian College in 1847, on account of his participating in an effort to aid two negro slaves to gain their freedom, by flight, from the District of Columbia, to the Northern States, have never found their way into print. I am positive in this statement, as the principal writer of them, Joel S. Bacon, President of Columbian College, in these letters states his aversion to making the matter public. That the expulsion of the student was an exciting event, both in the District of Columbia and in some northern communities, the letters also lead one to infer; also that gross mis-statements appeared in the press of that day. It is my belief, from the statements of Joel S. Bacon, that he took special pains to allow no authoritative statements to appear in print from himself or the faculty of Columbian College, and the peculiar way in which I came into possession of the original letters bearing on the case, confirms me in my belief that the true history of the matter is now related for the first time. (1.)

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(1) The series of letters here published I found carefully sealed in the binding of a large book, belonging to Joel S. Bacon, President of Columbian College from 1843 to 1854. The book came into my possession, with many others, belonging to Joel S. Bacon, by purchase of the library, by myself, from the estate of his son-in-law, Rev. H. W. Dodge. The letters indicate great pains taken in their wording. Three separate drafts were made of each letter, the sense being the same in each, but the matter more condensed in the third draft, which is the draft I have used in each case; excepting Dr. Sheldon's, which is the original.

The first letter is written to S. S. Arnold, Boston, Mass., in reply to a letter of inquiry from this Gentleman, who is the brother to the dismissed student, asking for particulars of the affair. It is endorsed at the top by Joel. S. Bacon."An accurate copy of the letter sent to S. S. Arnold, Boston."

Columbia College, D. C.

Jany. 28, 1847.

Dear Sir:-

Yours of the 25th, is received, and in answer, (2) I have

(2) (In the spelling I have taken the privelege of writing the words in full, the word "received" is abbreviated 'rec', "number" 'no', "should" 'sh' "would" 'w' "could" 'c' "though" 'th' etc, etc)

to say that the cause of your bothers removal from college, was his having interfered, unnecessarily, as it was deemed, under the circumstances, improperly, in the relations between Capt. Haynes, the steward of the college and his servants. The facts so far as they are known to us are simply these. Mr. Haynes, a gentleman of wealth and standing came from Va. to take charge of the stewardship of the coll. with the laudable purpose of aiding it by his means, his influence, and his labours, bringing a number of his servants (slaves) with him. Some formality under certain circumstances, is required in bringing slaves into the District; but Capt. H. took the best of legal council, and acted accordingly. Some little time since, it appears, two of his best servants, either of their own accord, or instigated by others, formed the design, secretly, of course, of attempting to gain their freedom, by taking advantage of some supposed informality in the mode of their introduction here. They made known their plan to your brother, as he says, after it was commenced by one of them at least, and applied to him for aid. He seems to have entered, with a great deal of zeal and earnestness into their plan, and to have offered them aid and encouragement, and to have sŏlicited others, northern young men, to join him in it; clandestinely of course. And here seems to have been his first act of indiscretion and of wrong in the case. He should have considered his relations to Capt. Haynes and the college, and that an interference in a matter of this sort and in such a way would be attended with very bad consequences; both to himself and others. He must have known it would be regarded by Capt. Haynes and by others as a secret conspiracy with his servants, against his rights and interests, as aiding and plotting in an attempt to wrest from him those who were not entitled to their freedom, as he supposed and now supposes, and that on the best legal authority; and that it would awaken against

him the strong and indignant feeling of those with whom he was associated. He may say he thought he was right, he supposed they were entitled to their freedom by law; admitting he did, he was not required to interfere, and he should have considered well the consequences, especially of such kind of interference and then told them, that, <u>situated as he was</u>, he could not aid them, he owed paramount obligations to others, and though he wished them well, he could not interfere, especially in the clandestine manner they proposed. Or if he considered his obligations to <u>them</u> paramount, (3)

(3) The following was written and crossed out in copy and does not appear, I presume in the letter sent. "He might have involved others in trouble, or violated his obligations to them. We should not then have had the right to interfere with his course, or have been injured by it at least to the same extent, however, improper, or inexpedient in itself, we might have thought it to be"

he might have gone openly to Capt. Haynes, and told him what he intended to do, and thus have avoided one of the worst features of the case; the appearence of <u>secretly</u> plotting and combining with his servants against his rights and interests. But in supposing they were entitled to their freedom, by law, he seems to have been either willingly, or too easily misled. In regard to one of them, at least, the one he particularly aided, (of the other I know less) there does no seem to be any ground for such a supposition; all the legal authorities of any weight, I have reason to beleive are decidedly against it, and he should not have hazarded so much as he even <u>knew</u> to be at stake, on such an uncertainty. Some of his best friends, I understand, advised him against it, and earnestly dissuaded him from the undertaking, representing the evils that would follow, to himself, and others; and even the only one who consented to join with him at first, afterwards withdrew, and left him to act alone. Unhappily he did not follow the advise given, but went on furnishing one of the servants with money and a note, anonymous and without address, but said to be directed to a lawyer, when suddenly the plot was discovered; the servants were immediatly removed to Va. and the one ~~which~~ whom he had particularly aided, promptly gave up the name of your brother as his aider and abetter, exhibiting the note he had written and the money he had given him. This

as was to be expected, and as I suppose he expected, produced a very strong and indignant feeling against himself, for such a course of procedure. A degree of excitement prevailed, for a time, in Coll. which it required all the skill and authority of h[illegible] the faculty to control, they did however control it, so that no [illegible] outbreak or violence was committed, or attempted. On learning from your brother, the nature and extent of his participation in the affair, the faculty thought proper to require his immediate seperation from Coll. not by an open expulsion, but by an immediate removal. This would probably have been necessary on his own account, but the ~~faculty~~ faculty felt it their duty to adopt that form of action, in order to vindicate themselves from any countenance or toleration of such a course of conduct in any student.

We deeply regret the occurence, as one which is attended with evil and only evil, to all concerned. It can not but be an injury to some extent, at least, to himself, and an injury to the Coll., to Capt. Haynes, and to the servants themselves, and seems likely to be productive of no good to any body, in any quarter. (4)

(4) This follows but is crossed out in copy. "And what aggravates the reflection, is, that it seems to have promised no essential benefit to any one, even at best. Captain Haynes is esteemed an exemplary and reputable Christian man. He is a humane master, treating his servants well, providing amply for them and is quite as indulgent towards them as is possible for their good, if they are to be kept as servants, are, and their task is an easy one. I think neither of them have done half as much as mine, who are hired, and who do what they please, and one of them, at least I think those who know him best, would scarcely expect if left to himself, would be anything better than an idle and worthless vagabond upon society. The other might perhaps, have done better, yet I think few persons would expect him to be any better off than he was before of as well."

I suppose he, had, when he left, the hope, that at a suitable time, if he desired, he might, perhaps, obtain from the faculty, such a statement of his case as would allow of his being admitted to another coll. to complete his course. I can only say, I suppose, much in regard to this, will depend upon his future course and I hope nothing will occur to increase the pain which we now feel on his account.

J. S. Bacon.

"The following letter to the offender explains itself."

(5)

Columbian College, D. C.

Feby. 1847.

To. H. J. Arnold,

Sir:-- Your letter of the 28th ult., is received, and in answer to your inquiries, I am requested to say. that the cause of your being "required to leave the college" was your having interfered unnecessarily, and in a manner which, under the circumstances the faculty deemed very improper, and wrong, in the relations existing between Capt. Haynes, the steward, and his servants. The Circumstances attending the removal you know. Your second inquiry is answered in the reply just given to the first. To the 3rd and 4th, you will gather all the answer which is now deemed necessary from the remarks which follow.

The principal points to which the faculty would refer, as constituting the wrong and impropriety of your course are these. 1st. Considering the relations in which you stood to the coll. and to Capt. Haynes, as the steward, your interference at all, in the matter of the servants. You were a student, and were thus brought into a connection with the steward, which should have forbid your interfering with his family or domestic relations, and any way, as a member of the coll. you were bound to abstain from any acts not absolutely necessary, which would be calculated to produce difficulty or disturbance or to effect injuriously the interests of the Inst. with which you were connected. If willing to recounter the evils yourself, you had no rights, unnecessarily to conduct in such a manner as to bring odium or injury upon others, or to prejudice any important public interest.

2nd. The manner of your interference. It was secret, clandestine, and would have as you know, or should have known, to Capt. Haynes, and to others, all the appearance of a secret conspiricy, a combination with his servants, against his rights and his interests. This would not for a moment be permitted by any head of a family, <u>any where</u>, but would cause you to be driven, with indignation, if not with violence from the threshold and the premises, whenever such a proceedure should be known. But you may say, an open and what would be regarded by others as a far more manly and honerable course, would have defeated the object. <u>Not if it was right</u>. If the servants were legally entitled to their freedom, an open

proceedure, I feel authorized to say, would not have affected in the least, their legal rights, nor Capt. Haynes' responsibility to grant them, those rights, But you may plead farther in justification or excuse, that you did not think it was wrong, as you supposed they were entitled to their freedon "by law"; you did not know this, but if you did, the remarks under the 1st head will fully apply; you were not required to interfere, and you knew according to your own admission that very serious, perhaps disastrous consequences would follow, both to yourself and others, if you should be found out". In the view of the faculty, you should have considered your obligations to others, growing out of your relations to the Coll. and to those with whom you were associated as paramount, and not have interfered in the manner proposed. But you did not know that the servant whom you attempted to assist was "entitled to his freedom by law". It was but a supposition and that too, it would seem, upon the slightest and most unsubstantial grounds. Indeed, the smallest measure of prudence or precaution, in taking so important a step, would have shown you at once, that there was not the least ground for such a supposition; the truth is there is no such law as was pretended, "designed to give their freedom to slaves situated as he was;" no law even requiring the Registration of such, on this subject. I speak Advisedly, for I have the law before me, which was referred to with the commentary of one of the ablest jurists in the District; and indeed a single glance at the law, itself, is sufficient to show any man of common understanding that there was not the slightest, even possible ground for such proceedings on the part of the servant Abram. So that all the danger (according to your own view) was risked, all the bad consequences which you knew would follow, if found out were hazarded, upon a mere supposition, and that upon the slightest examination proved to be utterly groundless. How then can such a course be justified, or even excused?

3rd. A disregard of consequences. These you knew would be bad; you even apprehended they would be terrible, perhaps to others, as well as yourself if you should be found out and yet you disregarded them, You hazarded great and certain evils, for an object which

you did not know would be of any benefit to any one, and the attainment of that, even, depending upon a mere supposition, which had not the least foundation, in fact. Could this be right? This is not the law of Benevolence, that has always a due regard to the rights and interests of others, and of all others, it looks to the means as well as to the end. We have no right to fix our eye, even upon a good object, and then rush to its attainment, at every cost to ourselves or others, and at the hazard, or injury of any or every other interest, however important. If the means be objectionable or wrong, the good is not attainable, by us, however, otherwise desirable, it is not within our reach, and must be relinquished. The opposite of this is that terrible revolting notion that "the end sanctifies (justifies) the means. And if this is the sentiment, as I understand to be, which you intend to avow in your note, you are indeed laboring under a grievous error. It is a Doctrine which would justify, and has been used to justify, the worst acts of which men were ever guilty. It is the terrible dogma under which the frightful horrors of the inquisition have been perpetrated and under which the wildest fanatics of every age have committed their nameless atrocities. To show that we have not misapprehended your views in this matter, you have told us that the harm and injury you have done, so far as you could forsee it, was knowingly and purposly done, you, "beheld trouble in the distance" you "acted not without consideration", and as you had said before, you knew "the consequences would be very bad, if it was found out; "thus going, not ignorantly, or inconsiderately, from the impulse of the moment, as we had hoped, and I supposed even, but knowingly and deliberatly, in the very face of that great Christian Law, which forbids, emphatically, that we should "do evil, that good may come." i.e.evil to any extent, that good however desirable, may come, This is not only not Benevolence, but not morality even. Such a Principle would justify the grossest outrage upon the rights and interest of others. It would make, and has made the sacred names of Benevolence and Christianity, a cloud for the worst crimes that stain the character of man. If this is the view you take of the matter, and it seems to be that conveyed in your note, it would indeed be a terrible misapplication of the law of Christ, which teaches us "to love our neighbors as oursleves"

for <u>that</u> is a "<u>Love</u>" which "Worketh no ill to his neighbor." (See Romans 13-10) Other considerations effecting the benevolence of the transaction, might be drawn from the character of the servant himself, and the probable effect upon his condition and prospects, had the attempt proved successful; although as I have said before this was impossible. While under the control and direction of his master, and well provided for as he was, Abram was esteemed a tolerably good servant, but I think it would be the opinon of all who knew him well enough to judge, that if set free, he would have become an idle and worthless fellow, a vagabond upon society, sent forth to swell the number of those whose sole business it is to prey upon the rights, the interests and the happiness of the community in which they live. (5)

J. S. Bacon.

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(5) At the same time that the above letter was written to Arnold, Dr. Bacon directed a lengthy communication to the most noted Baptist divine in Boston, Baron Stow. The letter was written in response to a request for particulars and details in order to be able to set the institution Columbian College in the proper light in this matter. The institution was very dear to him, as he was one of its first graduates, and in asking for particulars, he hoped to silence the severe criticism which was being hurled against his Alma Mater. The letter is quite long and where the sense of the explanation is largely a repitition of what has been clearly stated in the previous letters I will omit such repitition.

Columbian College, D. C.

Feby. 1847.

Dear Bro. Stow:-

Yours of the 22nd was duly received and although I regret the occassion which seems to have been chiefly instrumental in calling it, yet I am very happy to hear from you, and will endeavor to give you such light on the subject to which you allude, as within the brief limits of a letter, I may be able. It has indeed been the cause of a good deal of anxiety to us, not it is true, as to the course which our duty required of us, for of that we have had, and could have had but one opinion from the beginning, but from the difficulty in the peculiarly sensitive state of the public feeling on the subject of slavery; should our action be called in question, of placing the matter in so clear a light within any narrow compass, as to do justice to all the parties concerned. <u>We have published nothing from the faculty</u>. I have been extremely reluctant to do

so. I disapprove wholly of the policy of bringing private matters such as is usually the disipline of colleges, schools and families or other domestic relations, unnecessarily before the public. They can rarely judge of them fairly, or impartially. Bad feelings and party spirit are awakened, or perpetuated and much oftener I think injury, than good is done, to all concerned. But it would seem that in this case, the injury, so far as the coll. is concerned is already done, or is fairly in process, if your impression in regard to the "Sentiment of the N. E." is correct, I have no reason to doubt it, and whether by any just explanation we can make, it will be possible to counteract that sentiment, I do not know. It has arisen doubtless, partly from the nature of the subject, and partly from the exceedingly wrong and injurious statements both as to matters of fact and inferance, which have been made publicly and perhaps privately in regard to the whole and different parts of the transaction. But of one thing I am very sure, if the case could be fully known, in all its facts and bearings, not only would the sentiment referred to be altered, but the faculty would be sustained in their action by all the sober, reflecting part of the community, even in the N. E..

xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx Capt. Haynes brought with him a number of his servants (slaves) and apprehending there might be some formality required in introducing them into the "District" he took the best legal advise, Gen. Walter Jones, whom you know, by whom he was told, none was required in his case, not even registration, and was advised not to do it. xxxx Certain indications some months ago led him to suppose John intended to escape. For these reasons and because he had become worthless here, he had determined to send him, "John", back to Va. among his friends, where he hoped he would be more contented, and do better. Before executing this purpose, however, it came suddenly to his knowledge that Abram, the younger, was about to commence suit against his master for his freedom. This Capt. Haynes knew could be only a vexatious suit, and would cause him great trouble and expense, and would doubtless be attended with the loss or ruin of the servant, as he would undoubtedly run away, unless put in jail. He therefore, determined to send them both at once to Va.. Not, however, without taking the

same legal counsel and being assured that he had perfect legal right to do so. Abram on being told he was to go, immediatly and voluntarily stated that Mr. Arnold had been aiding and assisting him, and gave up the money and the note, which he said he had given him. He said further, that they, both the servants were to have been off, i.e., to have run away, on Monday (This was Saturday). Mr. Arnold gave the money and note to Abram. The note which was without an address and signed with a fictitious name, he owned, and said it was intended for a lawyer, whom he did not name.xxxxxxxxxxxxx. The faculty under the circumstances deeming it no longer proper to retain him as a member of the Coll, required him to leave, not by a formal expulsion, by the process in the manner which is commonly known as a simple removal.xxxxxxxxxxx. Perhaps I cannot find you a better or clearer view of these several points as they presented themselves to the minds of the faculty, than by stating a case. Suppose any one, yourself for instance, should choose to take into your family, one or more young men, for the purpose of imparting to them instructions, and taking the general direction of their moral, social and perhaps religious sharacter. Here comes one, knowing your circumstances and situation and applies for admission. You receive him, with expression of kindness, you bestow upon him your daily care, give him the best instructions you are able, you manifest an interest in his welfare, and endeavor in all suitable ways to promote his happiness, and to prepare him for future usefulness. You have servants, bound to you by legal obligations, as in common in the N. E. in the case of apprentices and others. After a time your servants begin to show signs of dissatisfaction and discontent, and then it comes to your knowledge that they are actually commencing a law suit against you, to break their indentures, which by the way you know to be secure, having taken the best of councel on this subject, and that they are on the point of escaping, i.e., running away and leaving you to a vexatious law suit ro recover them, taking care finally to place themselves entirely beyond your reach, let the case turn, which way it will, and on inquiry, suppose you find that this student,

thus situated, thus related to you and your family in whom perhaps you had felt a special interest, and to whom you may have granted special indulgences, has been, for some time secretly tampering with these servants, has been aiding and abetting and advising them in this course and has actually been supplying them with money to commence this suit, and all this with the full knowledge of the great trouble and expense it was to cause you, and the injury it was to do to others; in a word that it would wholly break up your family arrangements and throw your whole household into the utmost disorder and confusion. xxxxxxxxxx. But perhaps I ought to say a word now in answer to the pleas which Arnold makes in defense of his course; xxxxxx that it was only to <u>try the case by law</u>, and if it failed no great harm. Not so; it would have been clearly and obviously to every intelligent man, merely a <u>vexatious suit</u>, and attended ~~axdxaxxamdax~~ with very great trouble and expense to all the parties concerned. Who would like to be tried in this way? Who has a right to do it? Suppose a rumor had got abroad, unfounded to be sure, that you had committed a gross assault upon a female. Then suppose some one, a friend of yours, perhaps, or professing to be, taking up this report instead of going to you and giving you an opportunity to explain or refute it, should go to the magistrate, or aid and advise others to go and get a warrant and bring you before the court and urge and stand for indictment? Then suppose to any remonstrances against such a course he were to say. "Oh! I heard the report and I only thought I would give you a chance to <u>try it</u> before the Court; if you are found innocent, no harm is done or none that I care anything about." xxxxxx Of one thing, however, I feel confident; that in the action of the faculty no injustice has been done to Arnold, nor has there been any sacrifice of Northern Rights or any other rights; and more-over I feel assured that they acted just as you or any of those who censure us most would have had us act, or would have done themselves had they been placed in like circumstances, or had a like case been presented.

J. S. Bacon.

The last chapter in the episode is disclosed in the two following letters; wherein it is shown, Mr. Arnold made application in a northern college to pursue his studies, and yet notwithstanding the college is located in the hot bed of the abolitionists, the application is turned down by the president of the Maine institution.

Waterville College, April 30, 1847.

Rev. Dr. Bacon,

Dear Sir:- A few weeks since Henry J. Arnold made application by letter for admission into this college, stating at the same time some of the circumstances connected with his separation from Columbian College. It was said to him in reply, that this faculty here had never once departed from the understood usage of colleges, not to receive a student from another college without a certificate of honorable dismission, but that, in consideration a letter from yourself to the effect, that there was in your judgment, no valid reason, founded on his conduct while a member of Columbian College, why he should not be received into a college in New England. He now, however, without bringing the required statement, renews with great earnestness, his application to be received here. In this state of the matter, it has seemed to us, that some communication with you is an indispensable preliminary to any action on our part. I therefore, in behalf of the faculty of this college respectfully request you to inform us, at your earliest convenience, whether in view of his conduct as a member of Columbian College, you can give the above statement, and more particularly whether his seperation from your college, was in consequence of the violation of any college law. I am sir, very sincerely and respectfully yours,

D. N. Sheldon.

Columbian College, D. C.,
May 8th, 1847.

Rev. and Dear Sir:

Your letter of the 30th ult., was duly received; in answer to your inquiries in reference to Henry J. Arnold, I am authorized to say that the faculty here, cannot find it as their "Judgement" that "there is no valid reason, founded on his conduct while a member of the Columbian College, why he should not be received into a college in N. England" or elsewhere, and consequently

that no such certificate as that refered to in your letter, could be given him. On the contrary, it is our decided opinion, that the course of conduct which he pursued and the principles of action he assumed, would have justified and procured his removal from any college, or other institution, or from any well regulated family in the land. It is true that at the moment of his removal, when the facts were not yet fully known, his future relations to the college were left some what indefinite. It could not be at once determined whether the case was one which would require a public and formal expulsion or whether it would admit of his receiving such a statement of his previous character as might perhaps aid him in the attempt to gain admission to some other institution. But subsequent developments in regard to his conduct while here, in his course since leaving college, have brought the faculty fully to the determination above mentioned.

It may not be improper here to remark, that most of the statements published in regard to this transaction, are grossly erroneous in point of facts, and that all are especially deficient in giving the prominent points of the cases, and in stating the principles involved. In reference to the infraction of college laws, his conduct was a flagrant violation of all the laws (and we have several such), which require in a student integrity of character, correctness of deportment, a due regard to the rights and interests of others, and fidelity to his duties and obligations as a student; and it was for this he was removed from the college.

J. S. Bacon.

Though many phases of slavery sentiment, North and South, have been given before and since the war; this episode, with its various shades, and carefully considered by some of the foremost educators of that period, stands unique in the annals of "Abolition sentiment."